

## Incomplete

### Interview with Arthur Menke February 28, 1992

- A: My name is Arthur R. Menke. I was born in Hamburg, Germany, in the year 1927, February 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Q: Why don't we start off by you telling me a little bit about your childhood and your parents.
- A: I had a father whose age was at that time 55 and my mother at that time was 46 and I had a sister at the age of 17.
- Q: You had one sister? And that was the only sibling?
- A: Yes. We lived in a very nice neighborhood in Hamburg, Germany, and we had to leave that neighborhood and apartment we lived in because Jews were no longer allowed in that part of town. It was too good for them.
- Q: What time frame are you talking about?
- A: That was, I would say, in about, '38.
- Q: '38?
- A: 1938.
- Q: Up until that time, I know this is going to be hard to try to remember, especially because you were that young, but do you remember any of the time, around the time that Hitler came to power?
- A: Oh, yes. Of course, I was born in '27 but I vividly remember say around '35 and that's when the Jews were starting to suffer. And it was maybe around '38 when the Jews, like I said, were resettled in another part of town and we were not allowed to shop in regular stores. It was stores assigned especially to Jews with the merchandise was higher. We were also \_\_\_\_\_ benches which said "no Jews allowed". You couldn't go to a movie. And there were severe restrictions. I'm sure you recall Crystal Night, I don't think we have to get into that. I'm sure you know that. When the German official was killed in France and that was supposed to be a punishment to punish the Jews for that and that's how Crystal Night originated and at that time my father was taken to a concentration camp near Berlin for six weeks. They came to the house to arrest my father and he was at the place of business and ordered my mother not to contact him and they went and arrested him. And he came back after six weeks a broken man. He was hardly recognizable. And at that time the Nazis had taken over all German owned businesses and they were government run, so my father's business, he had a small factory producing rubber and signs, etc. and that business was taken over by the government and his bank account was taken and we were only allowed to draw a small amount of our own money at the time and my father was forced to work as a laborer packing shoes in a factory.
- Q: Do you remember when you were a small child, about this time, was there a lot of anti-Semitic

overtones, by the children, especially?

A: Well, the anti-Semitism, it was a lot worse in smaller towns first. Small villages, as a matter of fact, it was so bad that the people who lived in smaller towns went to the bigger cities because there was less anti-Semitism. Now, the German Jew, if you want to use the term integrated, he was not like the Polish Jew who was discriminated by the Poles many, many years before the German Jew was. And so, the German Jew was a proud German. Like my father fought for Germany in 1914-18 and was discharged a proud German soldier defending his country. And the German Jews were dumb enough to believe that what's happened to the Polish Jews, because the Polish Jews suffered sooner than the German Jews. "Oh, this will never happen to us. We are German, first before we are Jewish." But I recall being taken out of the school, I was enrolled in a German high school called "Talmud Torah" which is still standing today.

Q: That was a public high school or a Jewish school?

A: Jewish school. And they also had a girl's school where my sister went. It was a highlik a real fine school and we were well educated. Of course that was too good for the Jews again and the building was taken over by the Germans and we were all forced into a small school with the girls. Of course, there was a lot of immigration at that time and my mother saw the handwriting on the wall and wanted to get out of Germany. But I recall saying to my father, "you don't have a trade, it would be difficult to start over again" so they procrastinated until it was too late. We did try to leave Germany in the late '30's but it was too late.

Q: You said something earlier about being moved within Hamburg. Was that a ghetto set up in Hamburg?

A: Not really. It was a neighborhood where more Jewish people lived already.

Q: Before the Nazis?

A: Yes. The neighborhood I lived in was on the other side of the river which was a much nicer neighborhood.

Q: And they moved you into

A: Yes. And I was not welcome at the school either, any more, I was going to a public school there.

Q: Do you remember when you moved, what kind of feelings you had at that time?

A: Well, as a child, it didn't bother us at all. But of course, it was a terrible thing for my parents to go through. As a matter of fact, we had a real nice home at that part of town and at first we all lived, the whole family, in a rented room, you know. It was a trauma, at that time already.

Q: Let's see, you talk a little bit about Kristallnacht, do you remember anything specific about that night that happened to you or your family?

A: Well, I know that all the Jewish businesses were totally destroyed including huge department stores like Hecht Company. Hashta is the name all over Germany today and they taken furs and

threw them in the river and the people that owned automobiles were destroyed. The strange part is that my father's business was not destroyed because people didn't realize that my father was a Jew. So his business was not destroyed.

Q: Is there any reason for that, that they might not think that he was a Jew or did they just not know, is that

A: They did not realize that he was a Jew and like I said earlier, the German Jew was first German. I want to tell you a little incident. There was a Nazi holiday and of course the Jews would not display their flag. My sister and I would make a flag out of a sheet and hang out which my parents naturally reeled back in again. Just to give you a sample like there was no difference.

Q: Do you remember much about any friends in school that you had at that time in the neighborhood, especially from the children if there were any anti-Semitic

A: Yes, because they were agitated by their parents. We had to wear a Star of David with the name Jew written in and the letters were made in such a way that they looked like Hebrew, said German Jew, and it had to be worn on the outer clothes.

Q: From what time was this?

A: That started also in the late '30's. I would say '38 and the kids would throw stones, you know kids are cruel and not being allowed to go many places, was a hardship on the kids.

Q: Do you remember what life was like, we're not talking about a ghetto here but the neighborhood you moved to, was it guarded by the Nazis?

A: No.

Q: Was it free going back and forth?

A: Yes it was. And even at that time there were plenty Germans who were not Nazis but they were scared not to be Nazis. I remember as a little boy I worked in a little store they were selling health food and I took the deliveries for him. Beautiful people. But I also remember taking the packages to the post office, other kids would tear the labels off, you know, being Jewish, and causing problems and things.

Q: How did you work at this store?

A: It was a little part-time job. After school I worked there. There were Germans that my family knew who befriended us who were strictly against the system. I'll tell you how bad it was. One child remarked in school he overheard his parents the night before saying that some law that Hitler made was ridiculous or, I can't get the detail; anyway this man, this Christian man, gentile man, was arrested by the German Gestapo and eight weeks later his wife received an urn of ashes, they killed him. So the kids were scared of their parents. You were not allowed to listen to foreign broadcasts, like England and America were separate, so neighbors would turn other neighbors in that they were listening to foreign broadcasts and they were severely punished. You inquired of what type of neighborhood it was. Well, it was not a bad neighborhood. The living quarters were difficult to find and we didn't live as nice as we did

before. We didn't starve. It was just a different type of living. We were under pressure all the time like we were an enemy of your own country. And like I said earlier, a lot of people started to deport, they had enough sense to get out of there.

Q: Did a lot of people, were they able to get out? Was it more restricted as time went on?

A: Well, there was a point where Hitler wanted the people to get out. Of course, they had to have visas in order to come to this country. They had to be sponsored. So that sometimes created a problem. You had to have someone. They also had Jewish organizations, I think it was HIAS and others that assisted Jews from leaving. And then of course, you had to have a certain amount of money to leave and since my own bank account, my father's bank account was taken over, at that time, it was almost impossible to leave so when we wanted to leave in the late '30's, we couldn't leave anymore. My father wanted to go to Australia, that's what he hoped to do but it didn't work out.

Q: You talked about freezing your bank accounts. Were you allowed an allowance, is that how it worked?

A: To the best of my knowledge, he was allowed a certain amount.

Q: A certain amount a month or a week?

A: Yes, but it wasn't enough so my father had to work.

Q: You said before that there was no real hunger in this neighborhood that you were in?

A: No, I don't think so. There was food and everything was available and there was food on the table. There was no real hardship like I said earlier, there was only certain stores where Jews could do their shopping. They were state operated.

Q: All the stores they could go to or were certain stores with certain hours.

A: Certain stores at certain hours. They were operated by the state.

Q: Why don't we move on here to your deportation? Tell me a little that. How it happened.

A: It happened you received a letter through the mail. As a matter of fact, the postman knew of these letters and he normally would ring the doorbell when he had mail for us. He didn't do it this time because he was a decent guy. The contents of the letter would give us an order to vacate our apartment within so many hours and we were allowed so many pounds per person to take with us and then we were told in that same letter that we had to take our own key to our apartment to take to the local police station. I also want to add this that the gold and furs and other things, we had to turn in earlier already, anything of value.

Q: They seized your valuables.

A: They seized. Of course, some people didn't give it all up but there was a drive for that. So when we received our notice, we bought warm socks. I think we were allowed 100 pounds at first.

Q: What did you bring, do you remember?

A: You know, a backpack. Sweaters, warm underwear, clothing, extra shoes. And we had to report to a Masonic temple. Now I might want to add that the Masonic temple was also against the law to exist and my father was a mason and he went to secret meetings even.

Q: Freemason?

A: Yes. And we went to this temple, which the inside was all marble and completely destroyed on the inside. And we laid on the floor for the night and the Germans ordered us any cash money we had to turn in, any rings and so on, they made a last little pitch to get the stuff off and that was the first time we were guarded. We were loaded on open trucks and taken to the railroad station and loaded into regular railroad cars, not cattle cars, railroad cars.

Q: They had seats and everything?

A: They had seats and everything in it. They were old cars, most had seats. Some had to lay on the floor. And we traveled I believe it was three days and three nights to Russia.

Q: Let me back track just a little bit. When the letter came, did they give you any indication as to where you might be going, what you might be doing?

A: I think we were told we were going to the east to work.

Q: Okay, go ahead.

A: Now, I may have mentioned earlier that many transports that arrived in Minsk were killed right on the spot.

Q: And that's where you arrived, in Minsk?

A: Yes, Minsk, it was White Russia, German occupational Russia. Most people don't understand that.

Q: What time frame, what are we talking about, what year?

A: 1940.

Q: And that's when you were deported?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay, back to Minsk, sorry.

A: In Minsk we were marched, it was very cold, we were marched into an area which was at one time a Russian school. Now we were a transport of a 1,000 people. That Russian school was at that time occupied by Russian Jews. And they had to vacate that building to put us into that

building. It appeared that at one time it was a fairly modern school. It had running water. The faucets didn't work, the toilets didn't work but you could tell it was a regular high school like we almost have in this country. And we already saw a lot of dead people on the ground at this time, Russian Jews that were killed by the Germans that didn't evacuate the building fast enough.

Q: They were in the building or around the grounds?

A: They were in the building. It was part of a ghetto then.

Q: And this was in the wintertime, right?

A: It was in the wintertime. And we then gathered old mattresses and stuff and we stayed in that building and there was another building, other small out buildings and that's where we stayed at the time.

Q: Did you go out and work from there, is that what you did?

A: The first couple of days I don't think we did but then we were put to work. As a matter of fact, we had to build our own fences to go around there.